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The Friendly Yeti

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Abstract

Most images of yetis in Western popular culture and scholarly literature portray them as secular, predatory monsters. These representations overlook important religious dimensions of yetis that are hidden in the current literature, so I take a new look at yetis in Tibetan religions in order to clarify our understanding of these legendary creatures. Following a phenomenological approach that sets aside the issue of the ontological existence of yetis, I examine texts, art, ritual, and folklore in order to propose four yeti personal ideal types: the Buddhist practitioner, the human religious ally, the friendly yeti, and the mountain deity yeti. These ideal types enhance earlier scholarship by demonstrating that yetis may appear in friendly as well as dangerous guises, may play religious roles even when they are not venerated, and may embody numinosity even when they are most fearsome.

Keywords

yeti, Tibetan religions, phenomenology, Schutz, Buddhism, bodhisattva

One does not meet oneself until one catches the reflection from an eye other than human.

—Loren Eiseley (1969: 24)

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Yetis in Cultural Imaginations

Brian H. Hodgson, a British representative at the royal court in Kathmandu from 1820 to 1843, offered the first mention of yetis in the literature of the English-speaking world. His Nepalese assistants told him of a 'wild man' who 'moved, they said, erectly: was covered with long dark hair, and had no tail' (Hodgson 1832: 339). Major Lawrence A. Waddell added to the lore in 1889 when he observed alleged yeti footprints (Shackley 1983: 52). Around 1904 a British soldier named William Hugh Knight claimed to physically encounter a yeti near Gangtok, Sikkim. In describing this yeti to *The Times* in 1921 Knight said,

> He was a little under six feet high, almost stark naked in that bitter cold—it was the month of November. He was a kind of pale yellow all over, about the colour of a Chinaman, a shock of matted hair on his head, little hair on his face, highly splayed feet, and large, formidable hands. His muscular development in his arms, thighs, legs, back and chest were terrific. He had in his hands what seemed to me to be some form of primitive bow. He did not see me, but stood there, and I watched for some five or six minutes. So far as I could make out, he was watching some man or beast far down the hillside. At the end of some five minutes he started off on a run down the hill, and I was impressed with the tremendous speed at which he travelled (1921: 54).

Western encounters with yetis continued when members of the Howard-Bury Everest expedition of 1921 found curious large human-like footprints in the snow at around 21,000 feet (1921: 52-53). Their report prompted Henry Newman, a British writer for Kolkata's *The Statesman* newspaper, to shape yeti tales into a story about a mysterious danger lurking in the Himalayas. Misunderstanding the meaning of a Tibetan language appellation of this creature, *miteh kangmi* or 'human-like bear of the snow', Newman unfortunately named this being 'the abominable snowman' (Sanderson 1968: 52; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 [1956]: 344).

Ever since, recurrent images have appeared in American popular culture regarding so-called 'abominable snowmen'. Perhaps because of the regrettable appearance of the word 'abominable' in Newman's description, the vast majority of these notions of yetis have depicted them as ferocious, predatory beasts. From the 1964 animated Christmas special *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*, where a vicious yeti was partly tamed, to the bloodthirsty ogre of 2008's movie *Yeti: Curse of the Snow Demon*, popular culture characterizations portray yetis as huge brutes with superhuman strength and an opportunistic lust for human flesh. Moreover, these yetis are considered to be devoid of religious relevance.

There have been some able academic studies of yetis from archaeology, zoology, primatology, and biology, such as those of Shackley

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(1983, 1994), Prince-Hughes (2001), Sanderson (1968), Napier (1973), and Stonor (1955). Sadly these works ignore, understate, or misconstrue the religious dimensions of yetis and in so doing they misrepresent relevant data. The zoologist Ivan Sanderson, for example, misled a generation of scholars by arguing that yetis lack religious significance because they are not objects of worship (Sanderson 1968: 271-72), thereby overlooking other potential roles which yetis might play in Tibetan religions. Even a sensitive scholar such as Myra Shackley described a ritual featuring a yeti as purely a Tibetan Bön ritual rather than as an Indian Tantric Buddhist ritual with Bön influences (Shackley 1983: 59-60). Only Halfdan Siiger (1978) provided a nuanced presentation of yetis as they appear in religion, but his presentation was largely limited to the non-Tibetan Rong people of Sikkim and so lacks relevance to our understanding of yetis in important Tibetan cultural realms. On the whole the current academic literature does not possess a focused understanding of yetis in Tibetan religions.

Thus many Western popular culture representations and scholarly explorations lack a careful and complete understanding of yetis in Tibetan religions. Perhaps this is because both popular culture and academic presumptions may reflect the anthropocentrism prevalent in Western cultures (Noske 1997), which may occlude our understanding of non-human natural beings as religiously relevant and influential (Hobgood-Oster 2008) or as embodying sacredness (Shephard 1996). If, therefore, we are to arrive at a coherent understanding of yetis in Tibetan religions, we must scrutinize the religious dimensions related to the perception and understanding of yetis.

Fortunately for this task there are important alternative perspectives regarding yetis that remain latent in the literature. Through a review of this literature from a phenomenological perspective we may shift hidden images of yetis in religion from the background to the foreground. Looking anew at yetis affords awareness of them as amiable at times, religiously significant even when they are not venerated, and numinous in Otto's (1958) sense when they are at their most terrifying.

My interest in this investigation, I wish to be clear from the outset, is in cultural representations of yetis rather than with the accuracy of claims regarding their existence or nonexistence. Such claims should be verified by a zoologist, not a religion scholar. Moreover, a phenomenological method requires an *epoché* or bracketing of ontological claims (Jackson 1996: 6). Furthermore, faithfulness to the perspectives of the residents of the Himalayas, some of whom consider yetis to be biological beings, while others consider them to be mythological ones (Bjonness 1986: 290), demands methodological agnosticism regarding their existence.

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My exploration of the world of yetis in Tibetan religions will follow a phenomenological path as developed in the works of Alfred Schutz. Schutz studied under Max Weber and retained many of his teacher's approaches to sociological analysis, but he felt that Weber had never really clarified the concept of meaning in sociology. From Schutz's perspective, what Weber lacked was philosophical grounding, so Schutz turned to the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl in order to provide interpretive sociology with a solid theoretical footing. Schutz then recast Weberian concepts such as ideal types with greater clarity and explanatory power. As described by Schutz, ideal types can be identified by taking a cross-section 'of our experience of another person and, so to speak, "freezing it into a slide"' (Schutz 1967: 187). Sociological ideal types begin with a phenomenological perspective on behavior, resulting in 'course-of-action' ideal types, which can then be used to create 'personal ideal types', or ideal types of the agents of such activity (1967: 187). Construction of a personal ideal type follows by postulating the existence of a person 'whose actual living motive could be the objective context of meaning already chosen to define a typical action' (1967: 189) as a heuristic for analyzing the appearances and deeds of social actors.

However, a drawback of Schutz's theory, and sadly many other social science theories, is that Schutz understands society purely in terms of human society. While this anthropocentrism of Schutz's work largely remains implicit, we may discover a sense of it in his distinction between the 'natural world' and the 'meaningful world' (Schutz 1967: 218). In understanding society as only a human phenomenon, his theory fails to account for important social interactions between human and nonhuman organisms.

What Schutz failed to perceive was that nonhuman animals often participate in human social processes and, when they do, they should be included in any robust social analysis. As scholars such as Midgley (1978), Shepard (1996), Noske (1997), and Morris (1998, 2000) have shown, concepts of social action that exclude relevant nonhuman animals distort our knowledge of the world, including our knowledge of purely human life. In terms of this study, yetis as reported by some humans appear to indicate or condition certain human lived social actions. Therefore an understanding of the culturally constituted behavioral environments (Hallowell 1976: 358) of Tibetan religions requires an extension of Schutz's notion of society to include, at least sometimes, nonhuman social beings such as yetis. If the phenomenological study of society posits that 'society is institutionalized as experience' (Ferguson 2006: 160), then social experiences of beings such as yetis should be embraced within our concepts of society.

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Phenomenological anthropologist Michael Jackson (2002) offers a path out of this limitation of Schutz's work through his study of human interactions with new technologies such as computers. Jackson found that modern people typically anthropomorphize computers in a variety of ways, attributing to them positive feelings when things go well or malicious motives when they do not work properly, such that our interactions with computers mirror the ambiguity of 'fulfillment and frustration' inherent in human relationships (Jackson 2002: 335). In other words, Jackson found that the same rules of social reciprocity that govern purely human relationships also appear, at least at times, in human interactions with computers. On this basis humans may experience other beings as social intersubjective compatriots and consequently, we should expand our phenomenological understanding of society to include, 'persons, animals, gods, spirits, material things, and technologies' (Jackson 2002: 335). As we will see, the folklore of yetis also involves similar ambiguous relationships of 'fulfillment and frustration', so it is appropriate to expand our understanding of the phenomenology of Tibetan society to include the presence of yetis. Following Jackson allows us to understand yetis as nonhuman social actors, or 'persons' in Hallowell's sense (1976: 359), and thereby to construct Schutzian personal ideal types of yetis.

In my own analysis I deploy Schutz's approach to ideal types to illuminate the appearances of yetis in their Himalayan homeland. In a way resembling how Schutz described personal ideal types such as 'woodcutter', 'miser', or 'police officer' in trying to grasp phenomena 'in their nakedness, just as they are' (Ferguson 2006: 161), I have perceived four ideal types of yetis: 'the practicing Buddhist', 'the human religious ally', 'the friendly yeti', and 'the mountain deity'.

Yetis in the Lore of Asian Mountain Peoples

Yeti-like beings appear in the lore of many Asian mountain peoples over a vast area from Sichuan in China to the eastern Himalayas in Bhutan, and from there westward along the Himalayas all the way to the Pamirs, so there are many names for and understandings of this mysterious creature. The word 'yeti' itself comes from the Sherpa dialect of the Tibetan language. Sherpas live in eastern Nepal, having migrated there from Tibet in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, so they are in many ways ethnically, culturally, and linguistically Tibetan (Ortner 1989: 4). 'Yeti' derives from the Sherpa word *yeh teh* (*g.ya dred*[1])

1. This essay seeks to be accessible to non-specialists yet still relevant to specialists. However, most non-specialists find it difficult to pronounce many Tibetan words

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(Snellgrove 1995 [1957]: 214), or 'cliff-dwelling bear'. As such, Sherpas recognize two kinds of yetis. The larger species of yeti, the *dzu teh* or 'livestock bear', walks only on all four legs and preys on livestock such as goats, cattle, and yaks (Shackley 1983: 52). According to biologist Charles Stonor, this is the Himalayan red bear (*Ursus arctos isabellinus*) and Sherpas recognize it as such (Stonor 1955: 64). The smaller of the two yeti species is the *mi teh* or *meh teh* (*mi dred*), or 'human-bear'. Many Sherpas have shown that they can easily recognize bears but insist that the bipedal *mi teh* yeti, unlike the *dzu teh*, is not a bear but rather is a unique species (Stonor 1955: 158). It is the *mi teh* yeti which appears in the Buddhist temple adornments, religious *thangka* painted scrolls, and the stories I describe presently. Non-Sherpa Nepalis might call the yeti *banmanche*[2] (Stonor 1955: 26), *nyalmo*, *teh-lma*, or *ban jhankri* (Peters 2004).

In central Tibet one finds the creature called '*migö*' (*mi rgod*), 'wild human', more commonly than 'yeti' (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 157). Other Tibetan names include *kang mi*, 'snow man'; *mi shompo*, 'strong man'; or *mi chenpo*, 'big man' (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 [1956]: 344). Many Tibetans say that yeti footprints resemble those of the *teh mong* (*dred mong*) or *mi teh* (*mi dred*), which in Tibet is the Himalayan brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), and sometimes in Tibet the yeti is called *mi teh kang mi* (Shackley 1983: 52; Stonor 1955: 5), 'human-like bear of the snow'. All of these appellations appear to imply some closeness with humans through the use of the term *mi*, which denotes a human being.

Since at least the eighteenth century and likely much longer, many Himalayan peoples have understood yetis as real creatures (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 158; Vlček 1959) and yeti reports have continued into the twenty-first century. Tibetan cultural images describe yetis as ape-like rather than bear-like, with long arms, a powerful torso, a conical head, and a body covered in long brown or reddish hair (Shackley 1983: 62; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160). The hairless face of a yeti has a flat nose, like a primate, rather than the protruding nose of a bear (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160; Stonor 1955: 45).[3] A yeti may move on either two or

transliterated into the Wylie scholarly standard. Therefore I will give phonetic renderings of Tibetan terms and, when necessary, offer the Wylie transliteration in following parentheses.

2. In Nepalese folklore a *banmanche*, or 'man of the forest', regarded in different areas as human or perhaps some human–ape hybrid, is a creature whose features may or may not resemble those of the yeti as described here (Stonor 1955; Peters 2004).

3. The ape-like description of yetis is remarkable given that there are no known species of large nonhuman primates high in the Himalayas (Schaller 1998). Equally remarkable are the Himalayan residents who insist that yetis do not have protruding noses like bears despite the habitation of the high-altitude slopes of the Himalayas by

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four legs depending on the ease of journey (Shackley 1983: 62; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160).

Contrary to many American popular culture sketches, yetis are thought not to live in the high altitude snows but rather in the alpine forests just below the snow line. During winter they move to lower altitudes and nearer to human settlements (Shackley 1983: 63; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160; Stonor 1955: 45), but they may travel across high altitude snowfields to move to a different valley or to feed on the saline mosses of the glaciers (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160). Along with these mosses, yetis are thought to feed on frogs (Sanderson 1968: 277) and pikas (Shackley 1983: 63; Stonor 1955), the abundant small mouse-hares found widely in the Himalayas. They also are said to steal food from humans (Sanderson 1968: 271).

Yetis are rarely seen and are believed to be nocturnal; some Bhutanese believe that yetis possess a small talisman called a *dipshing* which can even render them invisible (Choden 1997: x-xi). Yetis are more often heard, as they emit a distinctive high-pitched screech or whistling sound (Shackley 1983: 62; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160). Some aver that yetis possess their own language and females are the leaders of yeti groups (Nath and Gupta 1994: 100-101).

Liminal Yetis

If we are to understand the religious dimensions of yetis we must first appreciate their constitutions as liminally neither human nor nonhuman animals. For instance, the *Mani Kabum* (*mani bka' bum*), an important twelfth-century religio-historical chronicle of Tibet, exemplifies shared kinship between humans and yetis. According to the *Mani Kabum*, Tibet was once a giant lake that receded, leaving behind forests, animals, and mountains. The Tibetan people were born on one of these mountains bordering the Yarlung valley. This mountain was inhabited by a *sinmo* (*srin mo*), a female rock ogress, who was an incarnation of the Buddhist deity of mercy, Drolma (*sgrol ma*). The ogress met a monkey, who was an incarnation of the Buddhist deity of compassion Chenrezig (*spyan ras gzigs*), and the two mated. They produced six hybrid monkey-human children who became the ancestors of the original six Tibetan clans. The monkey-humans were short and covered with hair, possessed flat red

red, brown, and blue bears. Stonor (1955: 30, 34, 54) tells of showing photos of primates and bears to Tibetans and each time Tibetans identified orangutans, not bears, with yetis. He further indicates that yetis are seen in winter, when bears are hibernating (Stonor 1955: 158). Nonetheless, Messner (2000) concluded that the legend of yetis results from mistaken bear sightings. Meldrum (2006) concurred with Messner about some yeti encounters but found others to be intriguingly inexplicable.

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faces, stood erect, and perhaps had tails (Stein 1972: 46). Over generations the progeny of the six clan ancestors evolved, becoming less simian and more human, until they developed into the Tibetan people. According to Tibetan oral lore, however, some of these early ancestors did not evolve fully into humans and remained hirsute 'wild people' (*mi rgod*) (Stein 1972: 28), or yetis (Peters 2004: 30-31). The precise stage of the limited evolution reached by these yetis remains unclear. Nonetheless, in this story yetis and humans stand apart from the rest of the natural world in terms of origin and biology, as they share ancestry and differ only in historical evolution. Yetis are unlike other nonhuman animals, as they share ancestral kinship with humans, but yetis are not fully human, either. In the *Mani Kabum* yetis reside in an ambiguous liminal space, being neither human nor nonhuman animal.

This understanding of the liminal nature of yetis is affirmed in Tibetan sacred art and temple architecture. In Tibetan Buddhism, some *kyilkhors* (*dkyil 'khor*), which are elaborate meditational artworks, and *thangka* religious paintings in Buddhist temples clearly depict a yeti rebirth as lower than a human rebirth but higher than and separate from other animal rebirths (Shackley 1983: 60). This view is somewhat heterodox, as Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhist texts recognize six *gatis* or realms of rebirth: gods, demi-gods, humans, animals, *pretas*, and hells. In the Buddhist textual standard derived from India, there is no intermediate realm between the human realm and the animal realm. Nonetheless, many pieces of Tibetan temple art, sometimes in mainline monasteries, delineate a 'yeti realm' precisely as intermediate between humans and animals, perhaps reflecting the ancestral human–yeti special kinship described by the *Mani Kabum*.

The mountaineer Reinhold Messner provides an example of such liminality in a story from a visit to Bhutan (Messner 2000: 98-101). While there, Messner visited Gangtey Monastery, where there was a room with a wall covered with the stuffed heads of deceased animals. One may commonly find such animal heads in Tibetan monasteries to lend natural sacred powers to a religious spot. Of interest in Gangtey Monastery, however, was the position of the supposed yeti head in the display in a place of prominence above the heads of animals such as boars, tigers, and sheep. The religious leaders of the monastery confirmed that this is because a yeti rebirth ranks higher than an animal rebirth. This alleged yeti head blurs the boundary between human and nonhuman animals in a liminal way.[4]

4. Messner considered this yeti head to be fabricated. The famous yeti scalp from Khumjung Gompa in Nepal was shown by Western scientists to be formed from the

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Yetis in Action

Recognition of the human side of the liminal natures of yetis in Himalayan cultural imagery leads us to appreciate the surprising ability of yetis to practice the Buddhist religion. Generally speaking, Buddhism considers nonhuman animals to lack the ability to practice religion because animals lack the reflective capacity to realize enlightenment. As such, animals ordinarily cannot be ordained within the Buddhist monastic *sangha* community and Buddhism considers animals incapable of acts of religious devotion (Harris 2006: 208).[5] In most Buddhist thought, only human beings can practice Buddhism. In Tibetan lifeworlds, however, the liminal natures of yetis allow them to participate in degrees of humanness, including in this case the human practice of the Buddhist religion. While not all Tibetans will agree that yetis can be Buddhists, there are numerous cultural testimonies that they can.

Stories from the life of the great seventeenth-century Sherpa religious leader Lama Sangwa Dorje (*gsang ba rdo rje*), for example, indicate that yetis may participate in Buddhism in significant measure. As a youth, Sangwa Dorje left Sherpa country to study Buddhism in southern Tibet, where he became skilled in practice and was recognized as the fifth incarnation of the spiritual teacher of Rongphu Monastery (Snellgrove 1995 [1957]: 213). He returned to the Sherpa Khumbu region with the resolve to found monasteries. Seeking guidance from his tutelary deity Gombu (*mgon po*), he meditated in a retreat cave near Pangboche (Ortner 1989: 52). In Tibetan Buddhist areas, people typically revere meditating hermits like Sangwa Dorje and, as a sign of religious devotion, freely offer them food and water in support of their retreats. In this case, it was a yeti who cared for Sangwa Dorje (Snellgrove 1995 [1957]: 214). The yeti regularly brought Sangwa Dorje food, water, and fuel, and even became his Buddhist disciple (Wangmo 2008: 124). When the yeti died, Sangwa Dorje retained the alleged scalp of the yeti and this scalp and a supposed

skins of serow antelopes which had been sewn together (Hillary 2000: 197). The yeti hand of Pangboche Gompa was described as antelope and human bones which had been wired together. Of course, for some Himalayan people, if an article functions ritually as a yeti scalp, it is a yeti scalp, regardless of Western perspectives. An object fabricated centuries ago to encourage religious belief may have its origins forgotten and now appear to people as old, traditional, and therefore 'real'. In the words of David Chidester, yeti artifacts may enact 'authentic religious work' even if they are 'religious fakes' (Chidester 2005: vii).

5. Trees famously have been ordained by Thai monks and there are other instances in which animals and plants have been admitted into the Buddhist monastic *sangha*. But these ordinations often are not accepted as valid in all parts of the Buddhist monastic community because one question which must be answered affirmatively in the ordination process is, 'Are you a human being?' (Harris 2006: 208).

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yeti hand remained in Pangboche Gompa, the monastery founded around the year 1667 by Sangwa Dorje. For centuries afterwards, the Drogon lamas, who are successors to Sangwa Dorje's leadership, periodically would parade the yeti scalp around the village in a fertility ritual[6] to bless the people, animals, houses, and fields, a practice which continued until the lineage of the Drogon lamas recently moved to India (Wangmo 2008: 125). The yeti hand was housed as a sacred relic of the monastery until it was stolen in 1999.

As remarkable as it is to think that yetis can be Buddhist practitioners, the story of Sangwa Dorje is not isolated and other notions of religious yetis exist. Kunsang Choden, for example, recounts a Bhutanese tale in which a group of yetis serve as Buddhist shrine attendants (Choden 1997: 137-39). In the dead of night and away from the prying eyes of humans, a small group of yetis maintained a village temple devoted to the protective deity Panden Lhamo (*dpal ldan lha mo*). Each night the yetis would arrive, clean and refill the offering bowls on the altar, replenish the butter in temple butter lamps, and then disappear before sunrise. Like the yeti in the story of Lama Sangwa Dorje, these yetis perform Buddhist *bodhisattva*[7] deeds and acts of Buddhist devotion in ways very similar to Tibetans.

In the prior stories, we saw yetis behave like nice, pacific Buddhist *bodhisattvas*. These yetis are kinder and gentler, which is why some Tibetans told both Charles Stonor and René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz that yetis are placid and not to be feared unless injured (Stonor 1955: 64, 91; Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1957: 160). In Tibetan art, some renderings of yetis in Tibetan temples, such as at the Norbulinka Institute in Dharamsala, India, depict smiling, jolly, human-like creatures. What we see with these yetis is that, contrary to the dominant Western conceptions of yetis as fierce monsters, yetis actually can appear as well-behaved Buddhist practitioners. These stories offer us an alternative understanding of yetis that includes religious practice and amiable behavior.

In other stories yetis do not behave as Buddhist practitioners but as religious allies of humans. One such story tells of a yeti who exhibits the Buddhist virtue of gratitude, although perhaps in a less human and less peaceful way than that of our yeti temple attendants. This story is quite common, possessing several variants across Himalayan communities. In this story, a Tibetan Buddhist meditator, or *yogi*, wandered through the mountains. Then,

6. The ritual use of yeti body parts is also found in prescriptions for Bön magical potions which use yeti blood (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975 [1956]: 344).

7. A *bodhisattva* is a saintly figure in Buddhism who compassionately works to alleviate suffering and bring others closer to enlightenment.

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One day he was crippled by an attack of gout and was unable to walk. He established himself in a pleasant place at the edge of the forest where he found some goats, who eventually followed him everywhere like pets. There he remained.

On the other side of the hill were some abandoned shacks. Every day he would see a huge dark man coming and going between the shacks and the river. Apart from this, there was no other sign of life.

One week he no longer noticed his strange neighbor on his daily walk. Having become intrigued by that mysterious man and feeling a bit better, the yogi decided to investigate the man's dilapidated dwelling.

Inside, the yogi was startled to come face to face with a migö, or wild man, as Tibetans call the yeti. The hirsute behemoth was lying outstretched on the floor, eyes closed and fangs apart, seemingly unaware of the intrusion. He was feverish and obviously ill.

One of the yeti's feet was grossly swollen and full of pus. The yogi immediately noticed, protruding from the infected area of that vast foot, a sharp splinter of wood that could easily be removed. He thought, 'I know he can jump up and devour me at any moment, but now that I have come this far I might as well try to help the poor creature'.

While he gently extracted the long splinter, the yeti—aware that the lama was helping him—lay as still as a patient etherized upon an operating table. The kindly yogi cautiously cleaned away the pus. He washed the wound, using his own saliva as a salve; then he bandaged the bizarre foot with a rag torn from his own clothing.

On tiptoe he left the yeti, returning to his goats, which were tied to a tree in the forest. Days afterward, he saw the yeti limping down to the river, presumably for water, and then slowly returning to his house. Eventually the creature's gait improved to the point where he could walk without difficulty. Miraculously enough, the yogi's crippling gout also began to subside so that his painful stride began to return to normal, until he, too, was completely cured. After that, he no longer saw the yeti.

One day the ferocious yeti suddenly leapt down like a giant gorilla from the trees, grimaced at the yogi, then sprang back into the trees and was gone. A few days later the same thing happened—but this time the yeti was carrying a dead tiger on his shoulder. Placing the magnificent carcass in front of the lama as if in a token of his gratitude, he again bounded off into the dense jungle.

The yogi did not wish to eat the meat, but he skinned the beautiful beast with meticulous care. Eventually, upon his return to the Shechen Monastery, he offered the splendid tiger skin to the monastery for use during tantric rites (Das 1992: 229-31).

The grateful yeti in this story acted as a religious ally of the yogi by providing material support for the yogi's Buddhist practice. In Sherpa country we find another yeti who also acts as a religious ally of humans by providing both a protective function and a function as a scapegoat. At Khumjung Gompa, ceremonies of *Dumche* (*grub mchod*) memorialize the

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death of Lama Sangwa Dorje (Ortner 1989: 49). During the *Dumche* ceremonies a figure called a *gyamakag* (*rgya dmag 'gag* or *rgya ma kag*) guards the monastery entrance. The *gyamakag* is a human who 'represents a yeti and his role is to scare away evil spirits, who are said to be extremely afraid of yetis' (Wangmo 2008: 162). In this performance as a yeti the *gyamakag* wears the conical yeti scalp kept at the monastery, a sheepskin coat turned with the fur on the outside, and has his face painted black (Wangmo 2008: 173).

However, this yeti is more than a gatekeeper since the *gyamakag* also performs an important ancillary function. According to Jamyang Wangmo (2008: 171), on the second day of the *Dumche* ritual lamas prepare a special *lokpar torma*, a dough effigy (*gtor ma*) of the type that is often used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. The *lokpar torma*, however, differs from other offertory effigies. Intended as an exorcism *glud* or scapegoat, it alone consists of buckwheat flour, rather than barley flour; bears red and black paint; and contains representations of hellish flames as well as miniature models of human skulls. During the sixth day of the *Dumche* ceremony, lamas chant the ritual of the Red Wrathful Guru (*gu ru drag dmar*), during which the *lokpar torma* is infused with the sins and evil spirits that might afflict the village (Wangmo 2008: 171). In the past another effigy in the shape of a human also received the community's sins as a part of the exorcism process (Fürer-Haimendorf 1964: 202).

After a series of sacred '*cham* dances in the monastery courtyard, the *gyamakag*, armed with a sword, leads a procession out of the monastery to a pit outside of the village, all the while chanting loudly, 'Ho! Ho!' (Wangmo 2008: 173). The yeti *gyamakag*, still donning the yeti scalp, wears a mask over his mouth to protect him from inhaling evil as he carries the *lokpar torma* to the pit. The *lokpar torma*, bearing the weight of the community's harmful energies, is placed in the pit, and the people throw stones at the dough scapegoat figure while the *gyamakag* stabs it with his sword. By wielding the sword, the *gyamakag*, rather than the lamas and people of the community, takes on the negative karma from killing the demons trapped in the *torma*, making his ritual role as a secondary human-yeti scapegoat an unpopular one. While the *gyamakag* kills the effigy-bound demons, lamas chant invocations to beneficent *lha* gods for help in vanquishing the evil forces trapped in the dough figure. Then they burn the effigy, banishing its negative energy. Afterwards the people return to the monastery complex for more sacred dances and other festivities (Wangmo 2008: 173). As we see, in this ritual the *gyamakag*-as-yeti acts in alliance with humans by performing an essential, if negatively tinged, role in the exorcism ceremony.

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Numinous Yetis

In other manifestations yetis act in religious alliance with humans but in more numinous forms. Myra Shackley (1994), for example, describes how a *mi teh* yeti, this time explicitly understood as a numinous nonhuman animal, performs a positive, protective ritual function at a Tibetan Buddhist ritual in the Himalayan region of Lo Manthang. Annually the Tibetan Buddhist Sakyapa monastery of Ngon-Ga Janghub Ling Monthang Choedhe (*sic*) hosts a five-day *Deje* ritual to drive out demons, these demons understood both as physical forces and as inner impediments to enlightenment. The ritual features a slew of religious '*cham* dances in which the central figure is the Tibetan Buddhist deity Dorje Purba (*rdo rje phur ba*). At the end of the ritual drama Dorje Purba embodies the power to slay a major demon because of the help of dancing monks dressed as the deity's four sacred animal protectors: a tiger, a wolf, a snow leopard, and a *mi teh* yeti. Rather than being a central, venerated deity, here the yeti is a numinous protector deity (*chos skyong*) who performs a fierce religious function. By helping to disperse negative forces from the community, this yeti represents a divine religious ally who is pacific towards humans.

Typifications of yetis who behave peacefully toward humans but perhaps violently toward other beings are common, but not all divine yetis are benign towards humans. Western cultural portrayals of yetis as monsters, while not fully representative of Tibetan understandings, do not arise in a vacuum. Yetis are sometimes dangerous to humans but the most threatening may also be the most divine, emerging as incarnations of mountain deities in the context of Himalayan folk religion.

Many Himalayan people consider a great mountain in their vicinity to be the abode of their local *yul lha*, or 'locality deity'. In fact, in Tibetan folk belief great mountains are deities who happen to appear as mountains. Such *yul lha* deities reward the local community for good behavior and discipline it for negative behavior, thus keeping order in social groups through various taboos and restrictions. It is widely thought that a displeased *yul lha* will distribute punishment by sending out an emanation, a physical embodiment of the deity, in the guise of a strong apelike yeti (Snellgrove 1995 [1957]: 314; Stonor 1955: 172; Bjonness 1986: 290). This mountain deity yeti, identified by Snellgrove (1995 [1957]: 314; cf. Hodgson 1832: 339) as a continuation of the *raksha* (Tibetan *gnod sbyin*) of Indian Hindu and Buddhist myth, enforces discipline by bringing illness, property damage such as crop destruction or depredation of livestock, or human death. This is why among the many Buddhist artworks of the revered Drepung Monastery in Lhasa, Tibet, one finds a mural painting of a numinous she-yeti carrying a decapitated human corpse.

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Because mountain deity yetis function as keepers of community order, Himalayan people frequently regard hearing or seeing a yeti as a bad omen and some mountain dwellers may seek the aid of a Buddhist leader to dispel negative forces and accumulate merit if they have encountered a yeti (Stonor 1955: 97-98; Snellgrove 1995 [1957]: 314). Further, because some yetis are deities, it is said that yetis should not be photographed and a yeti may kill a photographer who violates this taboo (Nath and Gupta 1994: 62). Of interest, Western popular cultural notions of yetis typically delineate secular beasts devoid of religious elements, whereas these yetis, like some Native American characterizations of sasquatch (Meldrum 2006: 73-86), represent powerful manifest deities, hierophanies of the sacred in Eliade's (1958) terms.

We find a specific example of a dangerous divine yeti's mandating community order at a pilgrimage site in Tibet, according to Tibetologist Toni Huber (1999). Dakpa Sheri is a high Himalayan peak that has long been one of the most popular destinations for Tibetan Buddhist pilgrims. Following Tibetan tradition, pilgrims worship the deity of the mountain, Korlo Dompa (*'khor lo sdom pa*), through the practice of *korra* or circumambulation. Protocol at Dakpa Sheri forbids women on the uppermost circumambulation paths as they instead are required to follow a defined female-only route. One day a woman wished to challenge this gender discrimination and defied the restrictions by dressing as a man. She completed a *korra* circuit reserved for men and then openly gloated about her accomplishment. After nightfall a yeti abducted her, split open a tree, and then sealed her inside. The yeti did so because he was an incarnation of the local *shing kyong* (*zhing skyong*), or protective deity, and it was his job to enforce the sacred restrictions (Huber 1999: 122). As at Lo Manthang, this yeti is not a central, venerated deity yet it still manifests in a numinous manner. Unlike at Lo Manthang, this yeti may threaten human well-being.

Conclusion: Four Types of Yetis

From the standpoint of phenomenological religious studies, while some yetis are ferocious, as previously thought in the West, others are amiable. But apart from this, I think four main types of yetis can be identified in Tibetan religions: practicing Buddhist yetis, yetis who are religious allies of humans, friendly yetis, and mountain deity yetis.

Buddhist yetis are pious and not dangerous to humans, arising as patrons of Buddhist saints, disciples of Buddhist masters, and *bodhisattva* temple attendants. Human religious ally yetis are friendly and nonviolent towards humans but not necessarily to other beings. They emerge as

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spiritual friends in the wild, as animal protectors in religious dance rituals, as gatekeepers, and as scapegoats. Some but not all human ally yetis are numinous. Sometimes the practicing Buddhist type shares characteristics with the human religious ally ideal type, yielding a third possibility, that of the friendly yeti.[8] Finally, there are the mountain deity yetis, who are aggressive and dangerous toward humans and other beings. An understanding of these yetis as ferocious is shared in some Western and Tibetan perceptions, but even these latter yetis are numinous in the Himalayas, in contrast to the purely secular creatures of the Western popular imagination.

Delineating these types provides alternative perspectives to the scholarly study of yetis. They reveal that, contrary to findings such as those of Sanderson (1968), yetis play religious roles even when they are not specifically venerated, they are sometimes numinous, and some even are placid Buddhist *bodhisattvas*, not 'abominable' ogres. Some yetis are sacred friends.

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8. People often mention yetis in the same breath as similar cryptozoological creatures such as the North American sasquatch. While popular culture in the United States frequently profiles sasquatches as huge, terrifying monsters, the American film and television series *Harry and the Hendersons* presented a friendly sasquatch. Harry the Bigfoot lived in close quarters with the Henderson family because of his gentle demeanor and caring actions and in this way his evocation ran counter to dominant perceptions of the legendary sasquatch as something to be feared. As such, Harry's precedent paves the way for an appreciation of an alternative vision of yetis.

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